Peter Matua started cooking large meals for family and friends who wanted classic African dishes to serve at African gatherings. When word spread about his cooking and demand within the community grew, he decided to start a catering business. However, he was completely in the dark about obtaining licenses and commercial kitchen requirements. When he went to the African Development Center to ask for a loan for his commercial kitchen, he was ultimately connected with LegalCORPS, which assisted Matua with obtaining a license and developing a business plan.

“When you have a place you can go get help legally and financially, and be given a direction that you can go pursue yourself, it really helps out tremendously” Matua reflects in a LegalCORPS video about his experience. It was through LegalCORPS that Matua’s business, Tuma’s Event Ambience Creators, was able to start on solid legal ground.

LegalCORPS is a nonprofit organization that provides free business law assistance for low-income business owners, inventors, and small nonprofits. The organization was established in 2004 in response to a demand for pro bono transactional business law. While the law requires legal representation to be available in criminal matters, finding legal help for transactional and civil matters is much more difficult for low-income individuals. Most legal aid services are litigation-based, so the attorneys who offer services there are not typically well-versed in transactional business law. As the only statewide nonprofit that offers this assistance, LegalCORPS’ services foster growth and opportunity in Hennepin County.

LegalCORPS relies on a network of over 500 volunteer attorneys to provide pro bono client services. They serve their clients through brief advice clinics, education, and full representation. An educational presentation or a quick 30-minute advice session can sometimes be all it takes to prevent legal missteps that could otherwise lead to financial ruin for small startup organizations.

In 2018, LegalCORPS was awarded a grant from the Hennepin County Bar Foundation to support the Entrepreneurs of Color program—the same program that helped Peter Matua launch his catering business. Much of this program is focused on developing relationships and building trust within communities of color. Like Matua, many immigrants seek help from resources within their own community, so fostering partnerships with these organizations is a key component to this program’s success. The trusted relationships that LegalCORPS builds are crucial for these entrepreneurs to get access to much needed legal services.

Though obtaining a patent or creating a business plan may not be a typical example of creating access to justice, the ability to serve low-income clients in life-changing business decisions can be the difference between staying below the poverty line and rising above it. “Access to justice through LegalCORPS means access to the business law system, empowering entrepreneurs to build successful businesses to support themselves, their families, and strengthen communities through legally sound business practices” says Sally Nankivell, Executive Director of LegalCORPS.

LegalCORPS offers the opportunity for attorneys to give back to the community by offering pro bono transactional business law services that can make life-changing differences. If you would like get involved with LegalCORPS by representing clients, giving presentations, participating in legal clinics, or serving on a committee, please contact Sally Nankivell at snankivell@legalcorps.org.

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